

# Otto Skorzeny, Soldier of the West

*A few vignettes from the life of a  
great soldier who dedicated his life  
to the survival of the West*

BY KENNETH JOHNS

THE DRAMATIC RESCUE of Benito Mussolini from a resort hotel-prison atop Gran Sasso mountain some 100 miles northeast of Rome first brought the name of Otto Skorzeny to the attention of the world.

Skorzeny, then a Hauptsturmführer in the first German special forces (commandos) organized in World War II, planned and carried out a glider raid on the mountain stronghold where the Allies in September 1943 were holding the Italian dictator.

The daring rescue, successfully executed against great odds, resulted in consternation in the Allied military and political headquarters and jubilation in Germany. Hitler was naturally delighted at the release of his friend. Skorzeny found himself showered with decorations. That he earned his Knight's Cross none can doubt. For good measure he was promoted and decorated by Mussolini as well.

Skorzeny again confounded the Allies in December 1944 when he masterminded Operation *Greif* (Gryphon) in which German soldiers disguised as Americans disrupted communications, confused American troops and made it possible for German armored forces to carry out the last great offensive of World War II, known as the Ardeness offensive

or the Battle of the Bulge. During the first two weeks the German armies pushed American forces back more than 60 miles and had isolated the important Allied headquarters city of Bastogne in Belgium. Only a hurried counteroffensive by the great General George S. Patton, Jr., broke the siege of the city and regained the lost territory. In the month-long engagement, the U.S. suffered 77,000 casualties, the Germans 120,000.

Who was this daring soldier whose exploits were so embarrassing and costly to the Allies?

Otto Skorzeny is an Austrian, born in June 1908 into a typical middle-class Viennese family. His name points to the fact that his forefathers had Slavic origins. Like other Austrians he suffered through the lean post-World War I years and the ensuing depression of the thirties. He did get into the University of Vienna and participated in the usual student activities including dueling. He achieved the desired *Schmisse* (cut on cheek) which later gained him the title of "scarface" in American quarters.

## Becomes Successful Engineer

Like his father, the young Skorzeny chose to become an engineer. He was practicing successfully when World War II broke out.

Austria was a part of the Third Reich and had to provide manpower to the German military forces. Rather than wait to be conscripted, the 31-year old engineer volunteered for the Luftwaffe. He had hoped to be commissioned a pilot because he had already done much civil flying in single-engine planes.

After a few months of training he was turned down as too old. He then volunteered for the elite German *Leibstandarte* of the SS, the premier SS division, usually known as "Hitler's Bodyguard."

Many had applied, but only 12 were chosen. Skorzeny was one of the 12 and the oldest one. He was promoted, rising through the non-commissioned rank to officer-cadet. He was then transferred to the Waffen SS division, "Das Reich," and promoted to second lieutenant.

He served for a short time in the Netherlands, and then in rapid succession took part in the Balkan campaign, the march into Rumania and Hungary, and then in the summer of 1941 the invasion of Russia.

In Russia he was hit on the head by enemy fire and in December 1941 was transferred to Vienna in a weak state of health. He came back with the Iron Cross and an illness which was to pursue him for years to come.

Early in 1942 Skorzeny returned to Berlin and was put in charge of technical services at a depot. Germany by this time was suffering some reverses and the military leaders felt that a special forces group like the British commandos was desirable to carry out raids and behind-the-enemy-lines operations. Skorzeny was chosen to head the new group. It trained near Berlin during the spring and summer of 1943.

Skorzeny and his commandos got their first taste of action (after preparing for two raids that were

cancelled before they started) in the fall of 1943.

### Summoned by Hitler

The undertaking began dramatically when Skorzeny, relaxing over a glass of cognac in a Berlin hotel, was summoned by his secretary and told to drive immediately to the Tempelhof airport where a plane was waiting to take him to Hitler's headquarters. A thousand thoughts coursed through Skorzeny's mind as he rode to the airport. That his mission would be the "impossible" rescue of Mussolini certainly couldn't have been one of them.

The snatching of Mussolini from his Italian/Allied captors is described in a recent paperback, *Skorzeny*, by Charles Whiting.\* It is also summarized in the Fall, 1974 issue of THE AMERICAN MERCURY. (Due to faulty editing, the MERCURY account erroneously states that Mussolini was rescued from La Maddalena on the island of Sardinia where he was held a prisoner for a month before being moved back to mainland Italy.)

The rescue was at first considered impossible because the resort hotel atop the Gran Sasso mountain was guarded all around, so a ground approach would be suicidal. Neither was there room around the hotel for any military transport plane to land with troops. Finally, Skorzeny decided to use gliders. The ground the gliders landed on was steep and littered with boulders. Most of the gliders were destroyed on landing and one was caught in a thermal gust close to the ground and crashed, wounding all ten men on board.

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\*War Leader Book No. 11, 159 pages, Ballantine Books, Inc., 36 West 20th Street, New York, N.Y. 10003.

## Italians Give Up Mussolini

But Skorzeny had little time to think about the greatly increased odds against success. He bounded for the door of the hotel, shouting in his bad Italian: "I want the commander! He must come here at once!" There was some bewildered shouting, then a bareheaded, mustached colonel appeared. Skorzeny informed him (in French, this time) that the jig was up and that Mussolini had to be given up to them. A sleepy and unshaven Mussolini was produced. The next problem was how to get the Duce from the mountain top.

Finally, a light reconnaissance airplane that was circling the mountain top as Skorzeny's spotting plane was radioed down and the six foot, four inch Skorzeny, the corpulent Mussolini and the pilot crowded into the two-seater and took off. A few hours later Mussolini was miraculously in Vienna, a free man.

After many dinners, testimonials, and medals, Skorzeny was back at the Berlin headquarters of his command troops and deep in new plots. One of these was the capturing of the French national hero and head of state, Marshal Petain, who at this time of 1943 was believed to be swinging his Vichy government to the Allies. But this mission was called off.

Then Skorzeny was given the job of getting the Yugoslavian partisan leader, Josip Broz (Tito), "dead or alive!" Tito's partisans were prolonging the war by keeping thousands of German troops in Yugoslavia that were urgently needed elsewhere, particularly in Russia. The plan failed. As author Whiting writes in *Skorzeny*: "... The Tito mission was doomed to failure, although Skorzeny risked his life travelling through partisan territory armed only with a submachine gun and

accompanied by two sergeants. An over-zealous corps commander refused to cooperate with Skorzeny's staff officers and himself launched a full-scale attack on Tito's HQ, complete with parachutists and glider-borne troops as at Gran Sasso. Tito escaped, living to fight another day. . . ."

## Capturing Horthy

On September 10, 1944 Skorzeny was summoned to the *Wolfschanze* where Hitler personally briefed him on his next mission, the possible capture of the Hungarian Regent, Admiral von Horthy, in case he decided to make a separate peace for Hungary with the Allies. This mission was replete with hair-breadth escapes from death by Skorzeny. In the course of the operations Skorzeny captured Horthy's son, Milos, who had begun negotiations with Tito's representatives and had agreed to surrender to the Russians for whom Tito was acting as middleman.

When the younger Horthy refused to go peacefully, he was placed on the ground, rolled up in a carpet and tied with curtain sash cord. The elder Horthy surrendered after Skorzeny took over the Regent's residence and was taken to Germany. He abdicated and was replaced by Count Szalasi who broke off all armistice negotiations with German enemies. The entire Hungarian action cost only 20 German lives.

## The Last Major Effort

Skorzeny's last assignment was on the Russian front, trying to establish a bridgehead across the River Oder that was to be used for a German attack that was never launched. While the Germans, debilitated after the Battle of the Bulge, were trying to bring up supplies and men, the Russians were steadily advancing,

fueled by massive quantities of U.S. arms, tanks and other equipment. After several weeks of dangerous reconnaissance and some desperate holding actions, Skorzeny was forced to pull back his troops. On the last day of February 1945, he received orders to return to Berlin.

It has always been a military axiom that the good leader takes care of his men. Skorzeny lived up to the highest ideal of this mark of the true leader. Upon receipt of his transfer orders, he hurriedly called Berlin to ascertain what was to happen to the surviving men he had with him. When he was told that the men must remain, he appealed to General Jodl, who told him there was no use pleading, the men were needed to bolster the defenses of the bridgehead. Sadly Skorzeny took leave of his men, many of whom he never saw again.

In Berlin Skorzeny was once again summoned by Hitler who personally thanked him once again for all he had done for the Reich. Soon thereafter he received an order from the Führer's HQ to go to Southern Germany and Austria and recruit the *Alpenkorps*, a force of diehard soldiers who would defend a planned "Alpine Redoubt."

When he got to Vienna he found the Russians were already in control of parts of the city and all friendly troops and many civilians had fled. The proposed "Alpine Corps" was never realized. There were no supplies, no troops. The Russians were everywhere. He released the remaining men he had with him, taking particular care that his volunteers from Allied countries such as Belgium and France had a decent chance of escaping and with few of his old comrades he fled into the Dachstein mountains. He soon learned from peasant contacts that the Americans were searching for

him. He sent several letters to the American commander and eventually a surrender was agreed upon. Eleven days after VE-Day he and three of his men walked into the American HQ in Salzburg, fully armed and still in German uniforms.

After two years in a prisoner-of-war camp, Skorzeny was brought to trial by a war crimes court. The many charges against him were all eventually dropped mainly because they had been trumped up or the Allies had committed similar "crimes" (such as putting their men in enemy uniforms). Despite his acquittal, Skorzeny was still sent to a "denazification" camp at Darmstadt. Here his appeal for release dragged on for months.

Finally, on July 27, 1948, Skorzeny decided he had enough. He stowed in the luggage compartment of a car that was leaving the camp. A friend met him near Darmstadt and from here he took a train to Stuttgart. He waited here apprehensively to see if he were being pursued. But the authorities were not interested in him. He returned to his career as an engineer.

Gaining a Spanish passport, he moved to Madrid where he is today, running a successful engineering consultant business.

Although it is customary for historians to malign the military leaders of the losing side, there are few derogatory words they can say about Otto Skorzeny. In fact, the reverse is true. For example, the Whiting book mentioned earlier, presents a true and flattering picture of this distinguished soldier of the West.

In the Whiting book, Skorzeny is quoted thus:

"I want to repeat what I have often said, that only by the help of

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got the money and you did not get the money, while filing, are you volunteering?"

"Yes, I guess so. It sure seems like it."

"What do you put down as your gross income?"

"Fourteen thousand two hundred twelve dollars and thirty eight cents."

"Under penalties of perjury would that statement be true and correct if you entered it as your gross receipts?"

"Yes it would."

"You lied to me."

"No I didn't, here's my W2 form, read it."

"It's in error. The only thing you received was 51 checks."

"That's right, 51 checks."

"You lied to the government."

"Holy Moses, jumping jeehosefat, golly gee. Anything I say I'm lying to somebody. I have to put something down."

"You lied to yourself."

"Now just darn minute, I don't mind lying to the government and I mind a whole lot less lying to you, but I'm irreversibly opposed to lying to myself. I do have to put something, don't I?"

"Not if you leave it to the bank or

everybody you know to do the filing."

"I'll end up stripes and a number and both frontal and profile snapshots hanging in every post office in the country."

"Because you wilfully failed to file or because you could not perjure yourself?"

"Hot Dogitty Dog, that's my answer. I can't perjure myself."

"Forget about that mess of papers?"

"You bet."

"Couldn't get the same answer twice in a row?"

"Lucky to even come up with an answer once."

"Never received your income?"

"Right, the bank and everybody else got it, not me."

"Incurred no tax liability?"

"Not till I collect my income."

"Submit a W4E form first thing tomorrow morning?"

"The very first thing."

"Spread the word to everybody you meet?"

"Beginning with my first lady."

"Well lookee who's here, the Happy Taxpayer, of all people."

*A dollar to a hole in a donut you've found another live one!*

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## Otto Skorzeny

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all my subordinates during the war, by their complete loyalty to me, their high sense of duty right to the end of the war and their unbelievable bravery in following me and strictly fulfilling my orders, was it possible for me to succeed in my different war actions.

"I will always keep alive the memory and reverence for all my soldiers, officers and staff officers who gave their lives in complete

fulfillment of their highest duty for our homeland."

The saga of Otto Skorzeny is a monument to the qualities of honor, loyalty, courage and resourcefulness which are all the more needed today precisely because they are scoffed at and ridiculed. But history belongs to men like Skorzeny. His life will be remembered in honor after the deeds of most of his contemporaries are forgotten or recalled only in infamy.